



Celebrations

Maya Angelou

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CELEBRATIONS

Rituals of Peace and Prayer

Maya Angelou



R A N D O M H O U S E

MAYA ANGELOU

CELEBRATIONS



Rituals of Peace and Prayer



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ON THE PULSE OF MORNING



A Rock, a River, a Tree,
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon.
The dinosaur, who left dry tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor.
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my back
And face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.
I will give you no hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than
The angels, have crouched too long in
The bruising darkness,
Have lain too long
Face down in ignorance,
Your mouths spilling words
Armed for slaughter.

The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me,
But do not hide your face.
Across the wall of the world,
A River sings a beautiful song,
Come rest here by my side.

Each of you a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made, proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
Yet, today I call you to my riverside,
If you will study war no more. Come,

Clad in peace, and I will sing the songs
The Creator gave to me when I and the
Tree and the stone were one.
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your
Brow and when you yet knew you still
Knew nothing.
The River sings and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,
The African and Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The Privileged, the Homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree.
Today, the first and last of every Tree
Speaks to humankind. Come to me, here beside the River.
Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River.

Each of you, descendant of some
Passed-on traveler, has been paid for.
You who gave me my first name, you
Pawnee, Apache, and Seneca, you
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then,
Forced on bloody feet, left me to the employment of
Other seekers—desperate for gain,
Starving for gold.
You the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Italian, the Scot,
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,
Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare,
Praying for a dream.
Here, root yourselves beside me.
I am the Tree planted by the River,
Which will not be moved.

I the Rock, I the River, I the Tree
I am yours—your Passages have been paid.
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.

Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands.
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts.
Each new hour holds new chances
For new beginnings.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.

The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day,
You may have the courage
To look up and out upon me, the
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.
No less to Midas than the mendicant.
No less to you now than the mastodon then.
Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up, and out
And into your sister's eyes, into
Your brother's face, your country,

And say simply,
Very simply,
With hope,
Good morning.

**A BRAVE AND
STARTLING TRUTH**



*Dedicated to the hope for peace, which lies,
sometimes hidden, in every heart.*

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we learn
A brave and startling truth.

And when we come to it
To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers
From fists of hostility
When we come to it
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate
And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean
When battlefields and coliseum
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters
Up with the bruised and bloody grass
To lay them in identical plots in foreign soil

When the rapacious storming of the churches
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased
When the pennants are waving gaily
When the banners of the world tremble
Stoutly in a good, clean breeze
When we come to it
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders
And our children can dress their dolls in flags of truce
When land mines of death have been removed
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace
When religious ritual is not perfumed
By the incense of burning flesh
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake
By nightmares of sexual abuse

When we come to it
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids
With their stones set in mysterious perfection
Nor the Gardens of Babylon
Hanging as eternal beauty
In our collective memory
Not the Grand Canyon
Kindled into delicious color
By Western sunsets

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji
Stretching to the Rising Sun
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother
Mississippi
who, without favor,
Nurtures all creatures in their depths and on their shores
These are not the only wonders of the world

When we come to it
We, this people, on this minuscule globe
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade, and the dagger
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace
We, this people, on this mote of matter
In whose mouths abide cankerous words
Which challenge our very existence
Yet out of those same mouths
Can come songs of such exquisite sweetness
That the heart falters in its labor
And the body is quieted into awe

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That, in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing,
irresistible tenderness,
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend

Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, we are the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when,
We come to it.

CONTINUE



ON THE OCCASION OF OPRAH WINFREY'S
FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY

Dear Oprah,

On the day of your birth
The Creator filled countless storehouses and stockings
With rich ointments
Luscious tapestries
And antique coins of incredible value
Jewels worthy of a queen's dowry
They were set aside for your use
Alone
Armed with faith and hope
And without knowing of the wealth which awaited
You broke through dense walls
Of poverty
And loosed the chains of ignorance which threatened to cripple you so
that you could walk
A free woman
Into a world which needed you
My wish for you
Is that you continue

Continue

To be who and how you are
To astonish a mean world
With your acts of kindness

Continue

To allow humor to lighten the burden
Of your tender heart

Continue

In a society dark with cruelty
To let the people hear the grandeur

Of God in the peals of your laughter

Continue

To let your eloquence
Elevate the people to heights
They had only imagined

Continue

To remind the people that
Each is as good as the other
And that no one is beneath
Nor above you

Continue

To remember your own young years
And look with favor upon the lost
And the least and the lonely

Continue

To put the mantel of your protection
Around the bodies of
The young and defenseless

Continue

To take the hand of the despised
And diseased and walk proudly with them
In the high street
Some might see you and
Be encouraged to do likewise

Continue

To plant a public kiss of concern
On the cheek of the sick
And the aged and infirm
And count that as a
Natural action to be expected

Continue

To let gratitude be the pillow
Upon which you kneel to
Say your nightly prayer
And let faith be the bridge
You build to overcome evil
And welcome good

Continue

To ignore no vision
Which comes to enlarge your range
And increase your spirit

Continue

To dare to love deeply
And risk everything
For the good thing

Continue

To float
Happily in the sea of infinite substance
Which set aside riches for you
Before you had a name

Continue

And by doing so
You and your work
Will be able to continue
Eternally

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

SONS AND DAUGHTERS



If my luck is bad
And his aim is straight
I will leave my life
On the killing field
You can see me die
On the nightly news
As you settle down
To your evening meal.

But you'll turn your back
As you often do
Yet I am your sons
And your daughters too.
In the city streets
Where the neon lights
Turn my skin from black
To electric blue
My hope soaks red
On the gray pavement
And my dreams die hard
For my life is through.

But you'll turn your back
As you often do
Yet I am your sons
And your daughters too.

In the little towns
Of this mighty land
Where you close your eyes
To my crying need
I strike out wild
And my brother falls
Turn on your news

You can watch us bleed.

In morgues I'm known
By a numbered tag
In clinics and jails
And junkyards too
You deny my kin
Though I bear your name
For I am a part
Of mankind too.
But you'll turn your back
As you often do
Yet I am your sons
And your daughters too.

Turn your face to me
Please
Let your eyes seek my eyes
Lay your hand upon my arm
Touch me. I am real as flesh
And solid as bone.

I am no metaphor
I am no symbol
I am not a nightmare
To vanish with the dawn
I am lasting as hunger
And certain as midnight.

I claim that no council nor committee
Can contain me
Nor fashion me to its whim.
You, come here, hunch with me in this dingy doorway,
Face with me the twisted mouth threat
Of one more desperate
And better armed than I.

Join me again at today's dime store counter

Where the word to me
Is still no.
Let us go, your shoulder,
Against my shoulder,
To the new picket line
Where my color is still a signal
For brutes to spew their bile
Like spit in my eye.

You, only you, who have made me
Who share this tender taunting history with me
My fathers and mothers
Only you can save me
Only you can order the tides,
That rush my heart, to cease
Stop expanding my veins
Into red riverlets.

Come, you my relative
Walk the forest floor with me
Where rampaging animals lurk,
Lusting for my future
Only if your side is by my side
Only if your side is by my side
Will I survive.

But you'll probably turn your back
As you often do
Yet I am your sons
And your daughters too.

WHEN GREAT TREES FALL



*Dedicated to Bernice Johnson Reagon
of Sweet Honey in the Rock*

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe briefly.

our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.

Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

Great souls die and
our reality, bound to
them, takes leave of us.

Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.

Our minds, formed
and informed by their
radiance,
fall away.

We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance
of dark, cold
caves.

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.

Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us,
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

**A BLACK WOMAN
SPEAKS TO
BLACK MANHOOD**



Our souls look back
In wondrous surprise
At how we have made it
So far from where we started

Fathers, brothers, uncles
Nephews, sons, and friends
Look over your shoulders
And at our history

The night was long
The wounds were deep
The pit has been dark
Its walls were steep

I was dragged by braids
On a sandy beach
I was pulled near you
But beyond your reach

You were bound and gagged
When you heard me cry
Your spirit was wounded
With each wrenching try

For you thrust and pulled
Trying to break free
So that neither of us
Would know slavery

You forgot the strength
Of the rope and the chain
You only remember
Your manhood shame

You couldn't help yourself

And you couldn't help me
You've carried that fact
Down our history

We have survived
Those centuries of hate
And we do not deny
Their bruising weight

Please my many million men
Let us lay that image aside
See how our people today
Walk in strength and in pride

Celebrate, stand up, clap hands for ourselves
and those who went before

Stand up, clap hands, let us welcome kind
words back into our vocabulary

Stand up, clap hands, let us welcome
courtesies back into our bedrooms

Stand up, clap hands, let us invite generosity
back into our kitchens

Clap hands, let faith find a place in our souls

Clap hands, let hope live in our hearts

We have survived

And even thrived with

Passion

Compassion

Humor

and style

The night was long

The wounds were deep

The pit was dark

Its walls were steep

Clap hands, celebrate

We deserve it

Jubilate!

AMAZING PEACE



Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes
And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.
Floodwaters await in our avenues.

Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow
to avalanche

Over unprotected villages.

The sky slips low and gray and threatening.

We question ourselves. What have we done to
so affront nature?

We interrogate and worry God.

Are you there? Are you there, really?

Does the covenant you made with us still
hold?

Into this climate of fear and apprehension,
Christmas enters,

Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up in
the bright air.

The world is encouraged to come away from
rancor,

Come the way of friendship.

It is the Glad Season.

Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps
quietly in the corner.

Floodwaters recede into memory.

Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us
As we make our way to higher ground.

Hope is born again in the faces of children.

It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they
walk into their sunsets.

Hope spreads around the earth, brightening

all things,
Even hate, which crouches breeding in dark
corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.
We hear a sweetness.
The word is Peace.
It is loud now.
Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by
its presence.
It is that for which we have hungered.
Not just the absence of war. But true Peace.
A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.
Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of
Christmas.

We beckon this good season to wait awhile
with us.

We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and
Muslim, say come.

Peace.

Come and fill us and our world with your
majesty.

We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and
the Confucian,

Implore you to stay awhile with us
So we may learn by your shimmering light
How to look beyond complexion and see
community.

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.

On this platform of peace, we can create a
language
To translate ourselves to ourselves and to

each other.

At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of
Jesus Christ

Into the great religions of the world.

We jubilate the precious advent of trust.

We shout with glorious tongues the coming of
hope.

All the earth's tribes loosen their voices

To celebrate the promise of Peace.

We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and
Nonbelievers,

Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.

Peace. We look at our world and speak the
word aloud.

Peace. We look at each other, then into
ourselves,

And we say without shyness or apology or
hesitation:

Peace, My Brother.

Peace, My Sister.

Peace, My Soul.

MOTHER
A Cradle to Hold Me



It is true
I was created in you.
It is also true
That you were created for me.
I owned your voice.
It was shaped and tuned to soothe me.
Your arms were molded
Into a cradle to hold me, to rock me.
The scent of your body was the air
Perfumed for me to breathe.

Mother,
During those early, dearest days
I did not dream that you had
A larger life which included me,
Among your other concerns,
For I had a life
Which was only you.

Time passed steadily and drew us apart.
I was unwilling.
I feared if I let you go
You would leave me eternally.
You smiled at my fears, saying
I could not stay in your lap forever
That one day you would have to stand
And where would I be?
You smiled again.
I did not.
Without warning you left me,
But you returned immediately.
You left again and returned,
I admit, quickly.
But relief did not rest with me easily.
You left again, but again returned.
You left again, but again returned.

Each time you reentered my world
You brought assurance.
Slowly I gained confidence.

You thought you knew me,
But I did know you,
You thought you were watching me,
But I did hold you securely in my sight,
Recording every movement,
Memorizing your smiles, tracing your frowns.
In your absence
I rehearsed you,
The way you had of singing
On a breeze,
While a sob lay
At the root of your song.

The way you posed your head
So that the light could caress your face
When you put your fingers on my hand
And your hand on my arm,
I was blessed with a sense of health,
Of strength and very good fortune.

You were always
The heart of happiness to me,
Bringing nougats of glee,
Sweets of open laughter.

I loved you even during the years
When you knew nothing
And I knew everything, I loved you still.
Condescendingly of course,
From my high perch
Of teenage wisdom.
I spoke sharply to you, often
Because you were slow to understand.
I grew older and

Was stunned to find
How much knowledge you had gleaned.
And so quickly.

Mother, I have learned enough now
To know I have learned nearly nothing.
On this day
When mothers are being honored,
Let me thank you
That my selfishness, ignorance, and mockery
Did not bring you to
Discard me like a broken doll
Which had lost its favor.
I thank you that
You still find something in me
To cherish, to admire, and to love.

I thank you, Mother.
I love you.

IN AND OUT OF TIME



*For Jessica and Colin Johnson
Stephanie and Guy Johnson*

The sun has come out
The mists have gone
We see in the distance
Our long way home

I was yours to love
You were always mine
We have belonged together
In and out of time

When the first stone looked
Up at the blazing sun
And the first tree struggled
From the forest floor
I loved you more

You were the rhythm on the head
Of the conga drum
And the brush of palm
On my nut brown skin

And I loved you then

We worked the cane
And cotton fields
We trod together
The city streets
Wearied by labor
Bruised by cruelty
Strutting and sassy
To our inner beat

And all the while
Lord, how I love your smile
You've freed your braids

Gave your hair to the breeze
It hummed like a hive
Of busy bees
I reached into the mass
For the honeycomb there
God, how I loved your hair
You saw me bludgeoned
By circumstance
Injured by hate
And lost to chance
Legs that could be broken
But knees that would not bend
Oh, you loved me then

I raked the Heavens' belly
With torrid screams
I fought to turn
Nightmares into dreams
My protests were loud
And brash and bold
My, how you loved my soul
The sun has come out
The mists have gone
We see in the distance
Our long way home

I was yours to love
And you were always mine
We have belonged together
In and out of time

**BEN LEAR'S
BAR MITZVAH**



AN ODE TO BEN LEAR

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS BAR MITZVAH

To you

in your walled city of childhood,
the years have inched by slowly, tortoise—like
crawling,

yet to your family and family of friends
the time has hurried, without halting,
without leaving enough seasons in which
to know you, to teach you, to love you.
You have been noted studying the Torah,
probing the words of ancient prophets
reading,

To many

you have come too suddenly to the new
region of manhood.

To your parents,

in whose immense realm of love
you have been clasped and claimed,
you are still the tender-tough boy,
yet in your face, they see already the promise
of the man you are becoming.

To them

you are too eager to step into the new land,
too ready to share the responsibility
with the citizens of your new country.

Some of your beloveds are longing to hold you back in the safe arms
of childhood,
where errant behavior could meet with soft
admonishment,

where most injuries could be made better by
a mother's kiss,

but even now you are leaning away toward
the horizon

with one foot raised to step forward.

None can stop you, none can stay you.

Please know,
prayers lay in the road where you will plant
your feet.

Please know
that aspirations of your family are high at
your back, and surround you entirely.

Please know
that great hopes of your devoted shower
you with
ardent wishes for your being and for your
future.

Your beloveds
know that you are entering a nation
where you must learn the difference
between seeking after justice
and lusting for revenge.

They know also
that you will meet those who would be kind
if only they had the courage, and
those who would do evil
if only they had the opportunity.

You will be bathed in the morning dew of
truth
and you will drink down the brackish water of
false witness.

Be wary, my nephew, but fear only God,
for you have a limitless resource of powerful
love

to evoke and call forth
and I,
prompt with all your primed and loving
family,
await your summons.

VIGIL



For Luther Vandross and Barry White

We are born in pain, then relief comes.
We are lost in the dark, then day breaks.
We are confused, confounded, and fearful,
Then faith takes our hand.
We stumble and fumble and fall,
Then, we rise.

Into each of our meanest nights, you
 have arrived,
Oh, Lord,
Creator,
To lead us away from our ignorance
And into knowing.

Now, we gather at your altar,
Rich and poor, young and
Aching old,
We are the housed and the homeless,
We are the lucky,
And the lazy.

As if at the foot
Of an ancient baobab tree,
In this moment
We gather to stand, kneel, sit, squat, and
 crumple here,
Knowing that, when the medical geniuses
Have done their best,
When the Nobel Prize Winners
Have used their most powerful energy,
We have You.
Creator,
We bring to You
Our brothers, sons, fathers, uncles,
Nephews, cousins, beloved, and friends.

We place the body of Luther Vandross
And the body of Barry
White Here before You.
They are among the best we have
And You are all we have.

Heal, we pray.

Heal, we pray.

Heal us all,

We pray.

PRAYER



Father Mother God, thank You for Your
presence during the hard and mean days.
For then we have You to lean upon.

Thank You for Your presence during the
bright and sunny days, for then we can
share that which we have with those who
have less.

And thank You for Your presence during the
Holy Days, for then we are able to
celebrate You and our families and our
friends.

For those who have no voice, we ask You
to speak.

For those who feel unworthy, we ask You
to pour Your love out in waterfalls of
tenderness.

For those who live in pain, we ask You to
bathe them in the river of Your healing.

For those who are lonely, we ask You to keep
them company.

For those who are depressed, we ask You to
shower upon them the light of hope.

Dear Creator, You, the borderless sea of
substance, we ask You to give to all the
world that which we need most—Peace.

Amen.

DEDICATED TO

Brandon Bailey

Johnson Caylin Nicole Johnson

Elliott Jones

Lydia Stuckey

Also by
MAYA ANGELOU

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Gather Together in My Name
Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas
The Heart of a Woman
All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes
A Song Flung Up to Heaven

ESSAYS

Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now
Even the Stars Look Lonesome

POETRY

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie
Oh Pray My Wings are Gonna Fit Me Well
And Still I Rise
Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?
I Shall Not Be Moved
On the Pulse of Morning
Phenomenal Woman
The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou
A Brave and Startling Truth
Amazing Peace
Mother

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

My Painted House,
My Friendly Chicken, and Me
Kofi and His Magic

PICTURE BOOKS

Now Sheba Sings the Song
Life Doesn't Frighten Me

Hallelujah! The Welcome Table

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Poet, writer, performer, teacher, and director Maya Angelou was raised in Stamps, Arkansas, and then went to San Francisco. In addition to her bestselling autobiographies, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she has also written a cookbook, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*, and five poetry collections, including *I Shall Not Be Moved* and *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* as well as the celebrated poem “On the Pulse of Morning,” which she read at the inauguration of President William Jefferson Clinton, and “A Brave and Startling Truth,” written at the request of the United Nations and read at its fiftieth anniversary. “Amazing Peace” was read at the lighting of the National Christmas Tree in Washington, D.C., in December 2005, while “Mother” was written especially for Mother’s Day, May 2006.